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# CCC's Informal Diplomacy Keeps Dialogue with China Open

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## CCC's Informal Diplomacy Keeps Dialogue with China Open

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Article by Kate Lamar, Photos courtesy of CCC

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What happens when the United States and China reach an impasse in official diplomatic discussions on critical issues like security policy or nuclear deterrence in Asia? The Naval Postgraduate School's (NPS) Center on Contemporary Conflict (CCC) is working to prevent that from happening. The center has partnered with the Defense Threat Reduction Agency and the Pacific Forum to run a series of informal dialogues between the two nations.

"For the last five years, we have run these Track II dialogues to discuss nuclear strategy," said Chris Twomey, professor with the National Security Affairs department and China expert for the CCC. "The professors and center staff have built up expertise in what is essentially informal diplomacy. I got involved when DTRA [Defense Threat Reduction Agency] wanted to start an ongoing dialogue with the Chinese on reducing the WMD threat. They had worked with CCC on other strategic dialogues and wanted to use them again."

"The dialogues allow us to define terms and concepts and express initial concerns about important topics in order to lay the groundwork for official dialogues," said Jim Wirtz, Dean of the School of International

Graduate Studies and a participant at the most recent China dialogue that took place in Hawaii in May.

"The strategic dialogues are not a substitute for official diplomatic negotiations, but represent a pragmatic response to the need to exchange ideas, since the Chinese have been reluctant to engage on an official level on these issues," said Twomey. "This one was particularly challenging because all formal military-to-military contact has been on ice since the arms sale to Taiwan was announced in January of this year."

Despite this added challenge, the dialogues went well said Twomey. The session experimented with a new format, breaking the larger seminar-style group into smaller discussion groups that focused on building mutually acceptable terminology and defining existing phrases and concepts.

"The new format worked really well," said Wirtz. "It was the first time the Chinese took charge and spoke up on some key issues. Prior to this, they had rarely spoken about Beijing's attitude toward the U.S. security cooperation with Japan. It turns out not to be entirely negative. They have a sophisticated view of security cooperation between Japan and the United States."

Other issues that were discussed at the most recent dialogue include U.S. and China's missile defense policies, China's arsenal modernization, and the U.S. and Russia's New START treaty.

"By the end, both sides understood some of the main concerns of the other and were able to express sensitivity and awareness to each other - even if they didn't agree. This allowed us to move past these concerns to an actual discussion of issues and real dialogue," said Twomey.

Twomey and Wirtz agree, one of the key advantages of the strategic dialogues is that their unofficial status allows participants the freedom to discuss issues in a more open and in-depth way than official talks permit. Participants, who include academics, think tank analysts and government officials from both countries attending in a non-official capacity, do not have to stick to official positions, but instead are free to examine options their governments may not be able to formally discuss.

"What the dialogues do is allow us to vet and explore ideas, issues and problems in an open format that isn't bogged down by the need to defend official positions or that set a precedent for official policy," said Wirtz.

"What the dialogues are really useful for is that both sides begin to understand the other side's thinking about nuclear threats, nuclear strategy and non-proliferation issues," said Twomey.

"Once they're over, we share our reports publicly and talk to Washington about what actions would be appropriate going forward."

The Center on Contemporary Conflict capitalizes on the regional expertise, academic understanding of security issues and informal diplomacy skills of its faculty and staff to regularly host similar dialogues for the U.S. government.